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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the impact of an intergenerational approach on: (1) the literacy development and literacy use of adult learners enrolled in an adult basic education program; and (2) the emergent and developing literacy of their children. The project is one of several that have been implemented under the Boston University/Chelsea Public Schools Partnership, in which the Chelsea Public Schools have signed a 10-year contract to be managed by the university. Subjects included 74 families. Four days a week, adults attended literacy classes where they were provided: (1) instruction in reading and responding to literacy materials of adult interest; (2) a selection of books; (3) strategies and ideas for use with their children; and (4) encouragement to share their children's stories and drawings and to discuss literacy events and their importance in their lives and the lives of their children. The impact of the program on parents and their children was assessed. Results suggested that the design of the program met the needs of the learners as indicated by the high attendance rate and low attrition rate. Evidence from three case studies indicated significant change in adults' ability to retell and then summarize what they had read when reading materials typically found in their home/work environment. Self-report data indicated steady and systematic practice of shared literacy in the home setting. With regard to the impact of the project on children's literacy learning, findings confirmed numerous previous investigations which indicated that consistent and frequent exposure to literacy in natural settings leads to the practice of literacy to facilitate play. (Fifteen references are attached.) (MG)

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# AN INVESTIGATION OF AN INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH TO LITERACY

(RUNNING HEAD: INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH TO LITERACY)

Paper presented at Annual Meeting of
the National Reading Conference,
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# AN INVESTIGATION OF AN INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH TO LITERACY[1]

Recent research supports a strong link between the home environment and children's acquisition of school-based literacy. Home practices such as shared reading and reading aloud, making a variety of print materials available, and promoting positive attitudes toward literacy, have been found to have a significant impact on children's literacy learning (Teale, 1984; Clark, 1984; Cochran-Smith, 1986). In homes where these types of literacy activities are not practiced, young children are likely to receive less preparation for school-based literacy prior to entering school, and less support and assistance in correcting problems that may occur after they enter school.

While the importance of family literacy is widely accepted (Taylor, 1983; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1989; Edwards, 1989), there are literally hundreds of families in which the adults in the household possess minimal print literacy abilities (Newman and Beverstock, 1990), and thus are unable or unaware of how to engage in the types of activities that are most likely to prepare young children for school-based literacy. The recent interest in family literacy has sparked national initiatives to link adult basic education with early childhood and elementary education (e.g., the federal government's Even Start and FIRST funding programs). Yet, little evidence exists on how such programs can effectively assist parents in both improving their own literacy abilities and in creating more effective home settings for introducing young children to literacy. The investigation that is described in this article was planned to provide such evidence. Designed as a three-year study, the project is now in its second year of implementation. Though only preliminary, data from the first year provide some important early findings and suggest some trends.

The study investigated two major questions: (1) What is the impact of an intergenerational approach on the literacy development and use of adult learners enrolled in an adult basic education program and (2) What is the impact of an intergenerational approach on emergent and developing literacy of their children?

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## METHOD

Setting and Participants. During the first year of the study, adult basic education classes in literacy were held in a community center in an urban neighborhood. Free childcare was provided for preschool-aged children. There were 74 families enrolled in literacy classes for at least one instructional cycle, including 59 mothers, 7 fathers and 4 grandmothers, 2 aunts and 2 uncles. Within the families, there were a total of 155 children, 42 pre-school-aged and 113 school-aged. Ethnicity included 12 white, 2 black, 56 Hispanic and 4 Asian families. For second language learners, the range of English proficiency varied from limited to fair, and the range of literacy in the first language varied as well, from limited to high levels of proficiency. Five of the families reported reading aloud to their children in their first language prior to participation in the study.

There were two criteria for parents' enrollment in the classes: a desire to improve their own literacy and a commitment to engage in shared literacy events with their children on a daily basis.

It should also be noted that the project under investigation is one of several that have been implemented under the Boston University/Chelsea Public Schools Partnership, in which the Chelsea Public Schools have signed a ten-year contract to be managed by the University.

Procedures. Parents attended literacy classes 4 days per week, 2 hours per day. Classes were organized within three instructional cycles of 9 weeks, 12 weeks and 13 weeks in length. In multiability, multilingual groups of 15 or fewer, they were (1) provided instruction in reading and responding to literacy materials of adult interest; (2) provided a selection of books, strategies and ideas for use with their children; (3) encouraged to share their children's stories, drawings and to discuss literacy events, and their importance, in their lives and the lives of their children. Emphasis was placed on family contexts for literacy use with specific emphasis on family storybook reading. In addition to storybook reading, parents were encouraged to join with their children in multiple uses of literacy, including reading and writing oral histories, composing letters to friends and relatives and notes to family members, journal keeping, and story and report writing and publishing. Parents were also taught how to help children with homework,

types of questions they might ask the classroom teacher to find out about their children's progress and how to ask questions of their children about the school day.

Instructional reading/writing strategies used with adults have received support in the professional literature related to adult literacy education (Thistlethwaite, 1983) and included assisted reading and writing, paired rereadings, cooperative learning and metacognitive training.

Children who attended the childcare center were provided an environment which encouraged the use of literacy within the context of play. Storybook reading, in small groups or individually, was a daily experience. In addition, a writing center providing opportunities and materials and purposes for writing and play centers encouraged print awareness through labels and uses of environmental print.

Measures. Several measures were employed to assess the impact of the program on parents and their children. To assess the impact on adults, the following measures were employed:

- Parents were tested following approximately 100 instructional hours. This instructional cycle was selected as consistent with data that indicates that adults require between 50-100 instructional hours to make significant gain in reading (Mikulecky, 1990). Measures of reading performance have been designed to assess those strategies which would impact the utilization of literacy in authentic contexts. Parents chose an assessment passage from a representative sample of the types of materials adults encounter on a daily basis. Included for selection were current newspaper articles of local and national interest, legal papers, short stories, and non-fiction selections. The chosen genre (though not the same passage) was used for pre- and post-assessment. Data collected included the learners' ability to engage in three reading strategies: to preview the passage and make predictions or formulate questions about its content, to recall information without the aid of questions, and to compose a written summary. Data were analyzed according to the number of logical predictions made in preparation for reading, the quality of the retelling (based on structural importance of ideas recalled), and quality of the written summary.

- Daily attendance rates were recorded. The mean attendance rate for the project participants for each cycle was compared to the average attendance rate for adults in basic education programs serving parents in a non-intergenerational model in the same community.
- Attrition rates were calculated following each cycle of instruction, and compared to national averages for adults in a basic education programs serving parents in a non-intergenerational model.
- Self-report data on the incidence of parent/child literacy activities in the home setting were collected on a weekly basis. Data collected included: number of selections read to the child by the parent; number of selections read to the parent by the child; number of times joint writing activities occurred; number of visits to the library; number of books borrowed or bought; number of times games were played involving words or reading; number of meetings held with the child's teacher; number of times parents assisted the child in completing homework. In an attempt to increase the reliability of the self-report data and to provide a sense of responsibility for both child and parent, parents and children were encouraged to "sign" each entry. For very young children, the "signing" was often simply a mark. Self-report data were analyzed and compared at the end of each instructional cycle, with a focus on the degree to which the incidence of literacy events suggested the existence of a routine or consistency in the utilization of literacy at home.
- 2 preschool-aged children attending the childcare program were observed for two hours weekly to gather information about their self-initiated literacy behaviors.

## RESULTS

Results from the first year of the study are reported in relation to the impact of the program on parents' literacy learning, children's literacy learning, and incidence of shared literacy events in the home setting.

Parents' literacy learning. During the first year of the study, the impact of the intergenerational approach on parents' literacy acquisition and use was evaluated on the basis of two behaviors: attendance and retention in the program, providing a measure of opportunities to

learn, and reading comprehension performance, providing a measure of strategy acquisition and use. Based on data from all 74 families enrolled in the project, the average attendance rate was 79.9%. This contrasts with an average attendance rate of 32% for adults in a traditional adult basic education program in the same community. It should be noted that in addition to the intergenerational vs. non-intergenerational focus of the two programs, they also differ in grouping plans (multi-ability and multi-lingual vs. homogeneous and mono-lingual) and instructional strategies (strategy-based vs. skill-based).

With regard to retention, 72% of all learners in the program completed at least one instructional cycle. Further, of the 74 families participating in the project, 48, or 65%, enrolled in more than one instructional cycle. A review of attrition rates reported for other programs reveals approximately 50% as the most frequently reported statistic (Sticht, 1988-89), significantly above the 18% attrition rate in this project. Using the local adult basic education program as the comparison group, the attrition rate for the same academic year was 57%.

To assess the impact of the program on reading performance, diagnostic assessments of three adults were analyzed. The three subjects were the first to have completed approximately 100 instructional hours. As described previously, measures of reading performance were designed to assess strategies which would impact the utilization of literacy in authentic, non-school-based contexts. Each of the three subjects held a high school diploma in her country of origin. All reported reading magazines and books in their first language and all three learners had limited English proficiency. During the assessment, learners were encouraged to use their first language to respond to comprehension tasks whenever they wished. In one case, during the pre-assessment, the learner composed her written summary in Spanish rather than English. Analysis of the pre-and post-testing protocols of the three subjects reveals a very consistent pattern of performance. All three learners began the project with effective pre-reading strategies, characterized by the use of the title, accompanying illustrations, and background knowledge to make predictions or establish purposes for reading. In all cases, pre-and post, predictions were based on passage content, rather than rhetorical form. In recalling information

without the aid of questions, pre-testing revealed extremely limited unaided recall for all subjects, generally eliciting only the main idea, and in two cases, discussion of how the main idea reminded them of a previous story they had read. Post-testing revealed significant change, with emphasis on a series of main events, in two cases guided by the chronology of events in the selection, which represented the text structure of the passage, and in third third case, guided by the reader's awareness of story structure. The most striking changes were observed in the written summaries composed by the three subjects. Pre-testing summaries (two in English and one in Spanish) were extremely lengthy (an average of 126 words), and were characterized by a focus on retelling a string of details with little attention to importance or interrelationships among ideas. Post-testing summaries (all in English) were far more brief (an average of 47 words) and were consistently focused on the structural importance of the ideas in the text, with an emphasis on main ideas and supporting details. Using the rules for summarization suggested by Brown and Day (1983), all three post-testing summaries provided evidence of an awareness of the structural importance of the ideas in text, the need to eliminate redundancy and the need to provide a topic sentence or statement of main idea. None of these criteria were found in the pre-testing summaries.

Shared Literacy. With regard to family literacy behaviors, preliminary findings are based on an analysis of weekly self-report data submitted by nine families over an eight-week period. None of the nine families reported that they had engaged in shared literacy activities with their children prior to enrollment in this program. For the eight week period, the families reported a total of 1,519 shared literacy events. Of these, 682 activities occurred within the first four weeks and 837 activities occurred within the last four weeks. While a test of the difference between the means yields a t-score of 1.89, which is not-significant at the .05 level, it is important to note that self-reports do reveal steady and systematic practice of shared literacy throughout the eight-week period. Since practice of parent/child literacy activities is emphasized from the first day of the project, steady and routine practice, rather than dramatic change, is an expected finding. With regard to specific literacy events, storybook reading is identified as the most frequently and regularly practiced activity, with families reporting a total

of 202 read-alouds during the eight-week period. In addition, activities such as listening to children read (114 instances), helping with (142 instances) and asking about homework (147 instances), and asking about school and reading (194 instances) are reported as frequent activities. Less frequent were activities which involved writing, such as composing stories, notes or messages, letters or greeting cards (57 instances). Also, the lending library provided by the literacy project seems to discourage family visits to the public library, an activity that is reported very infrequently (13 instances). In addition, self-reports indicate that television viewing remains a frequent activity. However, families indicate that of the 188 programs that they viewed with their children, 111 instances were accompanied or followed by discussion about the program viewed.

Child literacy behaviors. Case study data of two children confirm findings of numerous investigations suggesting that consistent and frequent exposure to literacy in natural settings leads to the use of literacy to facilitate and mediate play. Each of the children observed had a parent or family member enrolled in the literacy project, and each attended the childcare center on a routine basis. In the childcare center, each child was "shadowed" by a trained observer once a week for 24 weeks. Information about the child's literacy behaviors in the home setting were gathered through an interview with each child's mother at the end of the 24 weeks.

Case Study #1. Rosangela was exactly two years old when she entered the program. Though her mother reported not engaging in storybook reading at home prior to enrolling in this program, Rosangela demonstrated a love of books from the very beginning. During her first weeks, being read a book was often the only thing that would stop her crying when her mother left her. Following just four weeks, she was observed mimicking the childcare teacher's reading of a big book, sitting on the floor alone or with an audience of one or two children, holding the book and facing forward to read the story to her friends. When she did this, she chattered away in her native Spanish, which was the only language she used in the childcare program for approximately the first four weeks of attendance. She was similarly interested in writing, and during the fourth week, was observed modeling writing on the board for two children new to the project. Although characterized by just random lines at this point, four weeks later her writing began to consist of

many small, skillfully formed circles. Around the eighth week in the project, Rosangela began to demonstrate that she was learning both Spanish and English names for objects, as she browsed through books or identified objects in the room. By the twelfth week, Rosangela had become very interested in her name, asking her teacher to write it and demonstrating that she recognized her name from a list on the chalkboard, calling her teacher over and saying, "Esto Dice Rosangela," as she pointed to the correct name. By the end of January, Rosangela was using entire phrases in English, and able to retell the stories she had heard earlier, repeating the predictable phrases. She continued to self-select books several times each morning, and tended to choose the same books over and over, wanting to be able to participate as much as possible. Her interest in and production of writing continued to increase, now incorporating zigzag lines. She often wrote lines and lines of it, and often was observed watching the teacher or tutors write, and then attempting do the same.

At home, Rosangela's mother reported that she asks to be read to three to four times per week, and that she reads by herself almost daily. As observed in the childcare center, her mother reports that Rosangela likes to be the reader, and often reads to her mother. When she does, she asks her mother questions: "You like, Mommy? You like the story? You like?" Her mother reported that she spends a lot of time at home with paper and pencils, and that "she makes lines and circles and says she's writing Rosangela Si" She writes everyone's names, saying "This says papa, this is mama!" Her mother also has seen her incorporating writing into her play, stopping suddenly during a game with her brothers to write their names. Her mother says that the greatest change that she has seen in her daughter in ten months is "....that she tries to write, and tries to read too. Maybe she doesn't really read, but she tries, and I think next year she will be reading!"

Case Study #2. Erick joined the Intergenerational Literacy Project when he was two years, seven months. Although he attended the project with his teen-age aunt, he engaged in family literacy activities with both his aunt and his mother. His mother was in a adult basic education program, working toward a G.E.D. His aunt reported no family storybook reading prior to enrollment in the project.

When Erick first began attending, his interactions were non-verbal, a nodded "yes" or "no" in response to a question or comment. During the first two months, he sat semi-attentively during the group storybook readings, typically listening to the first part, but then wandering off to another corner of the room to play with trucks or blocks. During the fourth week, he was observed self-selecting a book reading activity for the first time, grabbing a book and a carpet square and sitting down alone, pointing to objects and naming them in Spanish. He showed little interest in drawing or writing during the first month, and was observed scribbling for the first time during the fifth week of the project. Over the next few days, he was observed going to the chalkboard three or four times each morning, and scribbling with chalk on the board for brief (30 second) periods.

By the end of the second month, Erick was becoming more engaged in storybook readings, often pointing to a picture and providing the word in Spanish, or repeating a word read in English from the book. From the eighth week on, he was often observed selecting many different books in the course of a single morning. Each time, he would either flip through the pages quickly and abandon the book or another, or sit with one book for 20-30 seconds, then move on the another book or a different type of activity. When approached by his teacher or an aide with an invitation to read a book, he almost invariably accepted, and usually sat for the entire story reading. During one such occasion during the tenth week, he was asked by his teacher to read the book to her. Holding the book upside down, Erick pointed at a picture on the right side of the page, then to one on the left side, labeling the object each time. During this same period, he began to draw and write for longer periods of time. He particularly enjoyed having his name written by one of the teachers, and by the end of the eleventh week, was attempting to write it himself.

By the end of sixteenth week, Erick could be observed selecting and browsing through a book for four or five minutes, and sometimes commenting on the illustrations to another child. When being read to at this time, he became far more engaged in the story, often jumping ahead with excited predictions. By this time he demonstrated clear awareness of left-to-right progression during story reading, and often tracked the print with his finger as he was read to. His increased

interest in books was particularly evident the day he was observed clutching a book tightly, and wandering off quietly and slipping it into his backpack!

Around the same time, Erick became fascinated with a set of plastic letters in the childcare room, and would spend long stretches of time (ten or fifteen uninterrupted minutes) playing with the letters either along, with another child or with an aide. He would sometimes put a few letters together and announce that he had spelled a word.

By week 20, Erick was particularly drawn to the writing table for long periods of time. His writing tended to be a collage of short lines, dots and circles. He began to learn the names of colors, in English and in Spanish, and delighted in lifting his marker from the paper just long enough to inform anyone near of its color. During this time, a cardboard mailbox was added to the classroom. This captured Erick's imagination and he would write letter after letter, carefully addressing an envelope for each, and depositing each into the mailbox. Most were intended for other family members, so before leaving each morning he would search his letters out from the mailbox and stuff them into his pockets to carry to their correct destination.

Also at this time, a velcro board was added the class displaying photographs of each child. Erick was the only child who was able, from the first day, to identify his name from among the numerous name tags and affix it beneath his picture.

By the end of the 22nd week, Erick's writing had begun to take on a deliberate rectangular form. A few days later, his first "E" emerged and had become even more distinct one week later. As this phase of the project came to an end, Erick's mother offered further insight into his development. She said at home, Erick asks to be read to almost every day for about half an hour in each sitting. On many days he does so twice or more. "He always brings the book. He looks for one and says, "Mommy, read me this book!" During the reading, she said, he asks many questions: ".....for example, about the pictures. What are they, what do they do.....And this, what, Mommy? And this, what? And this, what, what, what? And I have to explain it to him because he asks me again, until he's left without a doubt." Erick's mother says she has watched his writing develop: "Now he likes to write the E of his name, he does it all over the place, all of a sudden I'll see him writing it and he says to me, 'Look Mommy, look at my name!'" About their reading

together, Erick's mother says that "he pays more attention now when we read to him. Before, he couldn't sit still. And now I'm studying for the GED so I read books too, and when I sit in the room with books and he sees me, then he wants to be there too, doing what I'm doing."

While Erick and Rosangela are very different children, their literacy development is characterized by many similarities. First, they each became increasingly interested in books, and were observed selecting book reading as an activity to engage in alone and with other children or adults, at home and in the childcare center. Second, both children acquired concepts about print, demonstrating awareness of left-right progression, tracking print, top and bottom of a book, and the role of illustrations in picture books. Third, both children became increasingly interested in and proficient at writing, again, self-selecting writing as a play activity both in the childcare center and at home. Fourth, both children were observed using books to expand and clarify their vocabulary and concept knowledge, both in Spanish and in English. Clearly, none of these findings is strikingly different, and serve only to confirm earlier evidence of the importance of early exposure and varied opportunities in both home and school settings in promoting early literacy acquisition and use.

## DISCUSSION

While the data reported thus far are only preliminary, there is evidence of some trends and "early learnings." First, the particularly high attendance rate and low attrition rate suggests that the design of the program is meeting the needs of the learners in this project. The importance of this statistic can be assessed in relation to evidence of the number of instructional and practice hours which correlate with achievement gain by adults in reading. In a recent article, Mikulecky (1990) reports that it takes 50 to 100 hours for an adult to achieve one year's growth in literacy, resulting in the need for several hundred hours for a beginning reader to master reading the newspaper. Consequently, it's reported that only 10% to 15% of adults in current literacy programs ever reach this level (Diekhoff, 1988). A program which achieves high attendance rates, thereby providing parents increased opportunities for literacy instruction and practice, holds promise for increasing this percentage. The consistency of the attendance rates across

learners and across instructional cycles in this project suggests that the intergenerational approach combined with effective practices in the teaching of literacy support high and long-term attendance, leading to increased learning opportunities, and ultimately, acquisition of literacy knowledge at a faster pace for adult beginning readers.

With regard to the impact of the project on the reading and writing proficiency of adults, evidence from the three case studies indicate significant change in adults' ability to retell and then summarize what they've read, when reading materials typically found within their own home/community or work environment. These tasks require the ability to sort out important from unimportant information, and as such are relevant to many of the reading tasks that adults are required to perform, whether within home, community, school or work environments. As well, as learner's gain metacognitive awareness of the strategies which promote their own literacy learning, they also gain knowledge of the kinds of strategies which may be helpful as their children progress in literacy learning.

Self-report data indicate steady and systematic practice of shared literacy in the home setting. These data hold important implications for both the child and parent. Such events provide the parent increased opportunities for practice in natural and meaningful settings, thus promoting more rapid growth in literacy. As well, the events serve to prepare young children for successful acquisition of early literacy, and to promote continued success for school-aged learners.

Finally, with regard to the impact of the project on children's literacy learning, the findings confirm numerous previous investigations which have indicated that consistent and frequent exposure to literacy in natural settings leads to the practice of literacy to facilitate play.

## PLANS FOR YEARS TWO AND THREE OF THE STUDY

With the framework of the project now firmly in place, years two and three will focus on gathering data on increasing numbers of adults and children, and on gathering more qualitative information. Specifically , the following investigations have been added during year two, and will continue during year three:

Adult literacy behaviors. Writing samples are being collected from every learner in the project on entry, and following each 8 weeks of instruction. These will be analyzed on the basis of five factors, including quality of content, complexity of language, organization, connectivity and mechanics. As well, in addition to the reading assessments described above, running records (Clay, 1979) have been added to provide a measure of change in word identification fluency as well as in comprehension.

Shared literacy behaviors. The quantitative analysis of use provided by the self-reports will be supplemented by a qualitative analysis of the read-aloud behaviors of adults and their children. During year two, six Hispanic families and three Southeast Asian families, each having at least one child aged three, four or five years old, are tape-recording home storybook reading once each week for ten weeks. Cassette tape-recordings are being transcribed and analyzed with attention to the verbal interactions of parent and child, using the classification system suggested by Yaden, Smolkin and Conlon (1989). Frequency data will be reported by individual and by age group for each of five major classifications (questions about graphic form; questions about word meanings; questions about story text; questions about pictures; questions about book conventions).

Child literacy learning. Six four-year-old children are being engaged in storybook readings followed by oral retellings once each week. The setting for the retellings is the home setting, where it is conducted by a graduate student trained in retellings. Following a read-aloud, the researcher uses Morrow's (1989) prompt, "Tell this story as though you were telling it to a friend who never heard it. Each retelling will be audiotaped and fully transcribed. Analysis of retellings will examine inclusion of major story events, sequencing of story events, and elaboration using background knowledge. In addition, the effects of the program on school-aged children will be investigated during years two and three, exploring their response to family literacy events through entries made in an "intergenerational literacy journal," and through achievement gains on standardized tests administered by the school department.

## CONCLUSION

Early findings suggest that adult education classes may provide an important vehicle for promoting literacy learning of adults, and through them, for their children. Further research is needed to assess the impact of the program on larger numbers of adults and children. As well, longitudinal evidence of the impact of the program on the academic success of children is necessary.

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